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TAGS: [PREL](#) [SNAR](#) [PREF](#) [ETRD](#) [TH](#) [LA](#)
SUBJECT: THAI-LAO BORDER CHECKPOINT GIVES GLIMPSE INTO
DRUG-TRAFFICKING TRENDS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, Consul General, CG, Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) A visit to a small Thai-Lao border checkpoint revealed good cross-border cooperation, predictable trade patterns, and little or no illegal migration. However, the local Thai military commander reported that narcotics trafficking networks in the region were increasingly shifting their transit routes from the more heavily patrolled Thai-Burma border to the "softer" Thai-Laos border. End Summary.

Quiet Thai-Lao Border Checkpoint

¶2. (U) Consul General visited the Ban Huak checkpoint on the Thai-Lao border on February 26. This small border post links one of northern Thailand's poorest provinces, Phayao, with Oudomxai province in northwestern Laos. At this spot the Mekong River is many miles inside Lao territory. At the checkpoint CG met with Thai officials from Customs, Immigration, Border Police Patrol, Royal Thai Army (RTA), and Interior Ministry security forces. The following day we met with RTA 17th Infantry Regiment Colonel Wiraphong Phantachak, who is based in Phayao.

¶3. (SBU) The Ban Huak checkpoint does not receive much traffic - on average, about 50 Laotians and 30 Thais cross each day, the border officials told us. Volume picks up on the twice-monthly market day, when a couple hundred Laotians cross into the Thai border town. Even greater numbers (mostly ethnic Hmong) cross into Thailand during the Hmong New Year festivities held by Phayao's Hmong community. Our contacts said that Laotian Hmong in the area get along with local Lao authorities better than in the past, because most old hardline Lao officials have left government service by now. They reported no clashes in recent memory on the Lao side of the border between government troops and minority rebel groups.

Not Much Smuggling or Illegal Migration

¶4. (U) The goods that flow across this relatively minor border crossing are primarily Lao handicrafts and agricultural produce into Thailand, and Thai consumer goods, construction materials, and fuel into Laos. No Chinese traders are active in the region, but there is a big Chinese-goods market in the nearest village on the Lao side of the border. The market sells cheap

consumer goods that are popular among the Laotians but do not draw much interest from the local Thai. Our contacts reported little or no smuggling of contraband goods at Ban Huak.

15. (SBU) Ban Huak sees little or no illegal immigration from Laos, officials reported. They attributed this to strict control by Lao officials over issuance of border crossing passes. They reported no North Korean refugees, who typically enter Thailand at Chiang Rai province, which is farther to the north and closer to southern China.

Thai, Lao Officials Meet Regularly

16. (U) Thai and Lao province-level officials (including military) meet monthly to discuss illegal border incursion cases (mostly farmers pursuing straying cattle), border demarcation, and administrative issues. Currently, the border checkpoint is open daily from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., but the Laotians have requested extended hours of 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., mainly to accommodate Laotians who arrive at the border late because of poor road conditions on their side. Lower, district-level officials meet more frequently, but not on a fixed schedule. Recently, border officials from both sides got together for a sports competition day.

Drug-Running Shifting From Burma Border to Lao Border

17. (C) The Thai border officials told us they had made no narcotics seizures in recent memory. However, they were aware of some seizures made farther inside Phayao province of narcotics that had allegedly been smuggled across the Ban Huak checkpoint. We spoke in greater detail on the narcotics trafficking issue with the Phayao-based RTA 17th Infantry Regiment's Colonel Wiraphong Phantachak on February 27. He told

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us that, although counternarcotics was not the 17th's main role, it was engaged in two specific anti-drug activities:

-- further north in the interior of Chiang Rai province, at Doi Wawee in Mae Suai district, regimental personnel work with local hill tribes to train them in professional skills (mostly agricultural) as an alternative to opium cultivation. The troops also engage in intelligence gathering on drug trafficking networks that have historically been active in that area.

-- the regiment also mans a checkpoint in Phayao city on the major highway running south from Chiang Rai province toward Bangkok. Here the troops have on occasion made seizures of up to 100,000 yaa baa (methamphetamine) pills at a time.

18. (C) Colonel Phantachak told us that traffickers are increasingly bringing narcotics into Thailand from Laos, as a countermove against Thailand's intensified drug interdiction efforts along the Burma border. These are the same networks as before, now using different, "softer" routes to get the drugs (mostly produced in Burma) into Thailand. As for Phayao (whose border with Laos is less than 25 kilometers long), drugs are brought across on footpaths by villagers, avoiding the province's sole road crossing and checkpoint at Ban Huak. Asked about counternarcotics cooperation between the RTA and Lao Army, the Colonel complained that the Lao Army could be a lot more vigilant, but did not consider drug trafficking to be a priority since the drugs primarily transit through Laos rather than being consumed there.

Comment

19. (C) Generally speaking, the Ban Huak border crossing has little volume and few problems. The frequency with which local

Thai and Lao officials meet is a good practice, but unlikely by itself to discourage drug traffickers from eyeing this and other Thai-Lao border areas as a soft target for their trade.

110. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Vientiane and Bangkok.
MORROW